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ABSTRACT

The theory and practice of whole language teaching should be integral and simultaneous components of preservice teacher education. A number of instructional strategies and class activities can be used to provide preservice teachers with experiences similar to experiences they will provide to elementary school children. Examples of class activities include: (1) writing workshops during language arts and reading methods courses; (2) weekly workshops for collaborative work on assignments, thematic units, and projects; (3) shared reading of literature focusing on techniques of reading aloud and questioning, and exposure to current children's literature; (4) dialogue journals and learning logs in which students summarize the day's learning activities and ideas; (5) learning centers focusing on different topics, activities, and skills, which underscore the advantages of students moving at their own pace; and (6) shared field placements, in which students observe and participate each week in the literacy activities of a primary, multi-age, whole language classroom. Specific assignments in language arts and classroom management courses which can help education students understand the whole language philosophy include studies of children's authors and illustrators, the design and implementation of learning centers, the creation of child-centered bulletin boards, and the development of a unit using literature as the text. (AC)

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TRANSLATING WHOLE LANGUAGE

CHILD-CENTERED TEACHING THEORY

INTO PRACTICE

FOR

PRESERVICE AND FIRST-YEAR TEACHERS

OR

"BUT...WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM?!"

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Translating Whole Language Child-Centered Teaching Theory
Into Practice For Preservice and First-Year Teachers
Or "But...What Does It Look Like In The Classroom?!"

Whole-language teachers are professional educators who establish, possess, and employ a knowledge-base rich in human language acquisition and development, holistic child development, and the ideal conditions in which student learning is best facilitated. Whole-language is an individual expression of perspective; a set of beliefs that are practiced in a classroom setting (Altwerger, Edelsky, Florez, 1987). This belief system guides the development, reflection, and adaptation of appropriate methods, strategies and curricula in order to guide, support, and encourage young children in the discovery and love of learning. It is evident by visiting the classrooms of teachers who create and apply whole language philosophy that their practice has derived from research in linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, child development, curriculum, composition, literary theory, semiotics, and other fields of study. Whole-language teachers view themselves as life-long learners who constantly strive to make the integrated curriculum enjoyable, relevant, and instructionally sound (Goodman, 1986).

Specific and characteristic components of an early childhood teacher education curriculum most often include:

1. a knowledge-base in early child development in order to plan effectively for an appropriate early childhood curriculum;

2. a strong emphasis on holistic student growth that is social, emotional, physical, and cognitive in nature;

3. a focus on a child-centered proactive curriculum which is coupled with greater teacher freedom to develop their unique holistic curriculum (Goffin, 1989).

Because these criteria are congruent with a whole language belief system, many early childhood educators have long advocated these ideals and described their practice by other labels that did not explicitly explain what was actually going on in their holistic classrooms.

Topics and themes provide one framework for the evolution of integration among content areas in a whole language classroom. Moreover, these classrooms provide a student-centered curriculum that is rich in language, is discovery oriented, provides for authentic student learning experiences, provides students with choices for learning, and also allows students to assume responsibility for their own learning (Goodman, 1986). In a whole-language setting, all forms of oral and written language are respected, appropriate, and encouraged. Studies demonstrate that literature and literature-based experiences enhance development in all language related skills in preschool children (Hendrick,1988). Loban's classic longitudinal studies that followed and examined the language development of the same two hundred children from age five to age eighteen found that language development is key to success in school and in adult literacy. Loban (1976) concluded that parents, teachers, and librarians should stress the development of every child's oral language. Literature is a powerful vehicle resource to provide for this area crucial to a child's development and ultimate success in school (Norton,1991). The whole language teacher sees the phenomenal power in and relies heavily upon literature and in many forms of writing to establish a success-oriented and child-centered environment that stimulates meaningful mental constructions for young learners.

Colton and Sparks-Langer, (1992) report that teacher education programs must provide experiences for student teachers to construct meaning, focus on process, and to be reflective, self directed professionals in order to equip them to function effectively in the classroom and to deliver them from theories as abstractions and guide them toward theory that forms and is informed by practice. Reflective practice (Schon,1987) is key to development as an educator. Hultgren (1987) pointed out that critical thinking and reflection are skills to be mastered and teachers do not simply think critically because they are engaged in the act of teaching; teacher education programs must mandate means by which student teachers' reflective thinking might be facilitated. Field experiences must play a significant part of teacher education programs in order to empower preservice and inservice teachers' acquistion of these criteria. Studies done in early childhood teacher education programs demonstrate that the inclusion of field-based practica influence preservice teachers' beliefs, attitudes, preferences, and behaviors (Cohen, Peters, & Willis, 1976). If theory provides the structural foundation for pedagogical knowledge, then practice offers the masonry, and reflection is the mortar that girds it all together. Every element of the process is essential.

Student teachers and first year teachers who have accepted the commitment to practice a whole language set of beliefs in the classroom setting benefit greatly from interaction among and engagement in discussion with others whose beliefs are similarly oriented. Unfortunately, not much attention has been focused on methods that link reflection in preservice programs to a field-based element within preservice teacher education. Goodlad (1990), concurs that many student teaching programs fall short in the area of developing adequate theory as the undergirding constructs for the conceptual development of the preservice teacher to move toward goal identification in

practice. Reflection consists of teaching educational theory to prospective teachers and then placing them in the field setting to apply their learning in real-life situations (Cruickshank & Kennedy, 1986). Theory and reflective practice must be integral and simultaneous components in order for preservice teachers to develop a philosophical belief system that is expressed in field practice (Newman, 1985). Many opportunities should be given to preservice teachers to create holistic strategies supported by theory for a specific context, then practically applied in the real setting, followed up by processing and reflecting upon alternatives for the refinement of practice. If this becomes a common cycle in teacher education programs then the reflective practitioner will become the rule and young children the winners of more effective and holistic practice.

John Goodlad (1990) so eloquently verbalizes the didactic responsibility of teacher educators to empower preservice and first-year teachers with the ability to translate theory into reflective practice.

"Prospective teachers oriented to filling a large handbag with discrete bits and pieces of know-how may be destined to become pedagogical bag ladies and bag men, forever seeking more and more attractively packaged items to stash away. This image is far removed from that of the reflective practitioner, forever inquiring into relevant theories and principles and their implications for practice."

Strategies for Helping Preservice Teachers Translate Whole Language Theory into Practice

As teacher educators and advocates of the whole language philosophy, we are concerned that our senior elementary and early childhood education students are not able to translate the philosophy of holistic, integrated teaching theory into practice when they begin their clinical placements. We feel there are several reasons for this. Because whole language materials do not come packaged and planned in a "kit" it is difficult to readily demonstrate materials which could be used for instruction. Also, we have found that the students in the methods courses generally do not possess a "working knowledge" of good literature for children and are not familiar with popular writers and illustrators of children's books, making it difficult for them to create literature-based lessons. Additionally, although progress is evident, the traditional textbook-driven classroom has been predominate in our area, and teachers are not encouraged to collaborate on units of study and share lesson plan ideas. And finally, integrated instruction is difficult to observe because the self-contained classroom is the exception rather than the rule.

In the fall of 1991, we realized that our course assignments and activities in class needed to reflect the whole language philosophy of instruction and the concept of a "community of learners" as much as possible. This included reexamining the teaching techniques we used in class, and then bringing them more in line with the whole language philosophy. Reading the textbook, listening to lectures, and

critiquing articles pertaining to whole language were important, but much more was needed!

In this section of the paper we will describe the instructional strategies and class activities which we used with the students to provide them with experiences similar to the ones we wanted them to provide for elementary school children. Additionally, we wanted them to begin seeing themselves as teachers who work together cooperatively, rather than being competitive.

In-Class Activities and Teaching Strategies

Writing Workshop

The language arts/reading methods course met each week in two three-hour sessions. We used approximately 30 minutes of each class meeting for writing workshop. Writing folders were developed. As in a "real" classroom, these folders were not assigned any points toward a grade.

The first writing activity was to interview a fellow student and subsequently introduce him or her to the class. Each student then wrote their first rough draft, about themselves, using the interview notes as a prewriting technique. During the semester we wrote other drafts in response to literature, teaching situations, and personal situations. We also wrote different forms of poetry. By working a little during each class period, we literally worked through the writing process of prewriting, first draft, revising, editing, and publishing throughout the semester. At different points in the semester we shared and conferenced Students discussed what they considered appropriate conferencing questions and techniques, how

they felt during the conferencing periods, what improved their writing and what didn't! Right before they were to begin the field placement, each student published one writing piece of their choice.

At different points in the semester, the stages of the process were explained, and the students were able to attach much more meaning to the discussion because they were actually involved in it. By doing this, they were able to understand the depth of the writing process; it is not a one-day assignment from prewriting to publishing!

"Workshops"

Students met approximately once per week for two hours during the semester in informal sessions to work on assignments, thematic units, and projects, much the same way classroom teachers do for in-service activities. The purpose of this time was to encourage collaboration and to develop the feeling of a "community of learners," again congruent with the whole language philosophy. Students were encouraged to share ideas, resources, and materials.

One workshop was devoted to techniques of making books with children. Students were taught how to make books covers, sew the pages, and put the book together. They used these techniques again when they published their own work.

Shared Reading

We frequently read good literature to the students. The selections often related to the topic to be presented in class that day and served as a introduction to the topic. Additionally, techniques of reading aloud and questioning strategies were demonstrated. The use of "big books" was a frequent demonstration. Students were then

given the opportunity to work in small groups and practice these techniques with each other.

Selections from literature for intermediate-grade children were shared to help the students became aware of current novels, as well as classic books, for older children. Picture books for older children were also presented.

Dialogue Journals/Learning Logs

At the end of each class session, students were asked to summarize the learning activities and ideas presented that day. Reflection and synthesis were stressed, not merely a summary of the class. A specific topic might be assigned and the students would be asked to respond to it. The journals were read and responded to by the course instructors. By participating in journaling, students were able to understand how this could enable the children in the classroom to think about what they learned. This technique also allowed us to reflect on our own instruction and see where clarification of concepts was needed.

Electronic reflective journaling was also utilized. Students could send messages via computer mail and instructors would respond. Lesson plans were also shared in this manner.

Learning Centers

Learning centers were sometimes used as an instructional strategy during the class. Students moved from center to center, participating in the activities as directed by task cards or instructions on a poster. This enabled the students to collaborate on the completion of an activity, and to discuss issues or ideas related to

the overall topic for the day's class. For example, a topic in classroom management was "family involvement." Center activities included reading and discussing a recent newspaper article related to the family and education; reading a story about a child's family problems and discussing how it would affect the child at school and the teacher's role in this situation; and discussing scenarios and making choices as to the most appropriate course of action for the teacher. In the language arts course, poetry centers were developed for the students to be actively involved in learning about and writing different types of poetry at their own pace. These types of activities in the classroom allowed the students to see the advantages of allowing children to move at their own pace--some spent more time in one center than in another, yet the overall goals of the class could still be accomplished.

Shared Field Placement

"It's one thing to be taught about whole-language and it's entirely different to actually observe the techniques used in implementing the whole-language curriculum." --a senior elementary education student involved in the Shared Field Placement.

In the fall of 1992, the Shared Field Placement was implemented as a part of the language arts/reading methods courses. In small groups, students observed and participated weekly for seven weeks in the literacy activities of a primary multi-age classroom which could be described as a "whole language" classroom. The purpose of this experience was three-fold: 1) to allow preservice teachers to work with children without being observed or evaluated

by a college instructor; 2) to give students the opportunity to observe "whole language in action"; and 3) to give the entire class some similar field experiences which could then be discussed in the college classroom.

A typical session in the classroom included observation of the teacher as she demonstrated a lesson congruent with the whole language philosophy: shared reading and use of questioning during reading; mini-lesson related to a writing topic or writer's tool (spelling, handwriting, grammar), or conferencing with a child during Writing Workshop; the use of learning centers for teaching social studies and/or science concepts and process skills, as well as math and language arts concepts. The students would then be able to interact with one or two children as they wrote or participated in centers. They were able to observe and analyze how the children learned, as well as their language development in all areas.

The preservice teachers recorded their observations and reactions in a journal. The use of analysis and reflection was stressed. They were encouraged to question actions or demonstrations by the teacher which they did not understand, as well as children's behavior and reactions. The classroom teacher responded to the journals, answered questions, and clarified techniques and behaviors.

The shared field experience has allowed students who are placed in a traditional, textbook-driven classroom the opportunity to see that whole language is indeed a philosophy "alive" in the field, and not just talked about in college classrooms.

Course Assignments

Specific course assignments in the language arts/reading methods and classroom management courses were designed to help students understand the whole language philosophy, and to help them become more comfortable with the integrated approach to the language arts, and to the curriculum in general. These assignments could be used in their field placements even if the classroom they were assigned to was more traditional. While certain guidelines were given for the assignments, much of the decision-making was left to the student as to how the assignment would be designed and implemented in the classroom. Admittedly, we hoped that some of these teaching ideas would be of interest to the classroom teacher and that he/she would implement them at a later time.

While other assignments were required for these classes, these assignments best exemplified the integrated approach to teaching and learning stressed in our courses.

Author Study

Because students lacked knowledge of appropriate authors and illustrators of children's literature, a major assignment for the language arts course was to create a display for the classroom which highlighted an author or illustrator. The display incorporated learning through more than one area of the language arts. For example, children may read about an author, read his or her books, and then write about their favorite in a response journal. Tapes of the books frequently were included in the display. As part of the

assignment, students submitted information about the author; this was copied and bound and students could purchase a copy.

Learning Center

As a technique for managing a whole language classroom, the design and implementation of a learning center was a requirement for the Classroom Management course. Students integrated as many areas as possible into the center, which was based on the topic for the theme they would teach in the field placement. The center was designed so that children would actually learn a concept or process skill by using it; it could not be only a display of artifacts or books with no interactive component.

Bulletin Board

The creation of a child-centered bulletin board was an assignment in the management class. Again, the assignment was to integrate two or more curriculum areas, and create a display of children's work. A display of published writing related to the theme was the most common choice.

Big Book

The creation and use of a big book was an assignment that students usually enjoyed and that could be implemented in any classroom as part of story time. Again, this incorporated more than one area of the language arts, as well as another content area. Students were given several options on this assignment. They could write their own story, illustrate it, and use it with their other assignments; they could adapt a favorite story, print the text, and have the children illustrate it (most popular!); or they could replicate

a favorite story and illustrate it themselves. The most important requirement was, as with the learning center, that it be used to teach or reinforce a concept in their chosen theme. Students working with upper elementary grades could choose whether to make a book appropriate for that age group, or allow the students to write a story in big book form and then read it to younger children. They often were surprised at how much the older children enjoyed writing stories and then making them into big books for their own reading!

Literature Unit

Although this was by far the most difficult assignment, it best allowed the students to see how literature could be used in place of a textbook. Students created a literature unit based on one topic, again related to their overall theme. A text set was developed around a theme. Students then decided which concepts and process skills appropriate for their grade level could be taught using this literature set.

Conclusion

"I realize it is not easy to be a whole language teacher, but I got into this profession to help children learn and I feel this is the best and most exciting way to do it. It is important that we get away from our old, traditional ways to teaching. Times are changing and our teaching methods should be too." (from a take-home exam of a senior methods block student upon completion of the language arts/reading course)

That goes for college teaching, too! We cannot merely lecture in class; assignments must be well-thought-out and meaningful to our preservice teachers if we expect them to be progressive in their own classroom teaching. College instructors must be willing to demonstrate how to translate whole language theory into practice, and demonstrate the reflection process so necessary to excellence in teaching. We must support our preservice teachers in their journey as life-long learners, demonstrate collaboration and cooperation in the teaching-learning process and of course, demonstrate that we are life-long learners ourselves.

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